

How to master federal job applications

By Tom Arterburn

The federal government's Standard Form 171 (SF 171) is truly the monster of all employment application forms. Mastering it is a little like basic training – it's painful but has to be accomplished if you want a career with Uncle Sam.

To avoid a losing battle with this extensive and cumbersome questionnaire, apply the following tips:

Be focused and specific. Know which jobs you're qualified for, their requirements and availability, says Lillian Schoellhorn, chief of the central examining branch at the Defense Mapping Agency in St. Louis. Start by visiting a local Federal Job Information Center (FJIC) to review vacancy announcements. Unlike classified ads for civilian jobs, which can be vague and misleading, announcements for federal vacancies include a job's requirements and location, where to apply and whom to contact for more information.

If you're still not sure what a position requires, call the agency and ask for more details, Ms. Schoellhorn says. Although some applicants seek help from private firms that specialize in preparing SF 171s, Uncle Sam is more than willing to assist you for free, Ms. Schoellhorn says. "You have the support of the federal government in helping you apply," she says. "You never need to pay anybody anything."

Follow directions. Carefully read the form's instructions, questions and accompanied statements. If you don't, you'll likely answer incorrectly and expose your carelessness.

Match your background to the job requirement. "The most common mistake people make is filling out one SF 171 form, making 20 copies of it, and sending it in response to every job vacancy available," says Ms. Schoellhorn. The result is a generic query without a career focus, a skills match or sincerity.

For example, applicants for a personnel training job should only emphasize training experience on their SF 171 for the position, not other personnel background, Ms. Schoellhorn says. "You have got to gear your application toward the job you're applying for," she explains.

Answer all questions completely and concisely. Be explicit, thorough and honest. By the same token, however, don't draw attention to a bad experience by expanding on it.

Don't be wordy. Long-winded explanations aren't needed. Applications that look like telephone directories show that a candidate "is probably long on paper and short on actual expertise," says Joe Ruiz, chief of OPM's Federal Job Information and Testing Division. "We don't need to know that in eighth grade you won an award for being punctual in class."

Type your application. It shows that you're a professional who cares about appearances. Using customized software is another alternative. "Electronic forms can be used, but they must conform exactly to the standard SF 171," with the same questions, language and format, Mr. Ruiz says.

Make sure each form is current. The forms were changed in June 1988, but old ones still circulate. To make sure yours is current, check the bottom right-hand corner for the words, "Revision 6/88."

Don't take shortcuts. Don't try to cut corners by attaching job descriptions or a resume instead of answering questions about work experience. These queries demand the most extensive answers, so use SF 171-a Continuation Sheets or plain white paper to complete them. Although the instructions suggest beginning extensive answers on the forms in the primary application, then continuing on attachment sheets, professionals say it's best to write the answers only on the attachments.

Make your application easy to read. When describing "specific duties, responsibilities and accomplishments." On an attachment sheet, leave white space between paragraphs and use bullets, asterisks, underlining, and bold typeface to highlight key points.

Enhance basic experience. Use a descriptive technique recommended by the U.S. Postal Service called STAR (Situation Task Action Result) to describe your experience. For example, instead of saying, "Responsible for data entry." Say, "The data entry department was losing productivity. In response, I suggested our staff take a three-week refresher course to improve keyboarding speed and accuracy. Following the course, productivity improved by 50%."

SF 171's are demanding and bureaucratic, but so is the federal government. To prove you can cut it as a federal employee, complete your application patiently, meticulously and, above all, by the rules.

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